
ABROAD

CALAIS

Revival

The English Channel tunnel, or "Chunnel," is once more being revived. Two bank consortiums, one French and one British, have newly concluded that financing for the project is perfectly possible to obtain in the international financial market, provided, of course, that the loans are guaranteed by the two governments. The banks are opting for the classic plan of twin railroad tunnels covering the 22 miles between Calais and Dover, with a smaller service tunnel in between. The tunnel trains would be able to transport 3,600 vehicles an hour in each direction, representing 60 per cent of the current ferry traffic. This would permit an 8 or 9 per cent return on the investment. Moreover the Strait of Dover is the most crowded in the world. Five hundred vessels pass through it every day, and the figure is expected to double in the next twenty years. The governments are less enthusiastic than the banks, however, particularly the French government, which remembers the abandoned tunnel attempt of 1975, when several hundred yards of digging were carried out on both shores. One solution would be to have the loans guaranteed by the European Economic Community, which has a fixed interest, after all, in binding its component parts more closely together.

ROME

Dubious Battle

Arms for export can sometimes become an awkward commodity. This is a precept being pondered by the Italian authorities, who, in 1980, okayed contracts worth \$2 billion for the construction of 11 warships for the Iraqi navy. The shipyards are now almost ready to deliver the ships, and suddenly it looks, according to foreign observers here, as if the Italians may be furnishing Iraq a fleet that could sweep the Persian Gulf. Spokesmen for the shipyards in Venice and La Spezia that are building the vessels (four frigates and six corvettes, all with missile capabilities, and a supply ship) are understandably reluctant to say when exactly they can be turned over to their Iraqi crews and skippers; but it is clear that they are in the last fitting-out stages of construction. Meanwhile the huge Italian industrial conglomerate that controls the shipyards finds itself also doing business with Iraq's foe, Iran. It is engaged in building in that country a big steel mill and a seaport, worth even more commercially.

PARIS

Mariage plus à la mode

Benefit of clergy has been increasingly disregarded in many Western countries in recent years, but nowhere has the institution of marriage suffered a more dramatic decline than in the ranks of traditional French society. Until the last decade, French marriage statistics had shown stability for two hundred years. Then suddenly in 1972 the number of marriages fell by 25 per cent. This change is attributed by sociologists partly to changes in civil laws favoring single status from the aspects of both taxation and individual rights. But it also represents a profound social revolution. At the same time, divorces rose to a rate of one in every

four marriages of less than five years' duration. Also up is the birth rate of illegitimate children, on whom there has been less and less onus of social disapproval. In fact the word "illegitimate" in this connection is no longer often used, and the traditional notion of the shotgun wedding has become totally obsolete. Parents no longer dare suggest separate bedrooms for their offspring's live-ins, and if there is the pretense of an "engagement" it is only to "please the grandmothers." In 1982, three out of four natural children were recognized by both mother and father. These data, drawn from official sociological and demographic inquiries, also show that a high divorce rate does not necessarily mean a diminishing birth rate, an age-old chimera in France. After having had two or three children with a legitimate spouse, a man or woman often wants another child by his or her new partner. The statistics conclude that although there are many more singles and divorcés than ever before, the French continue to live very much two by two. What has changed is the kind of couples they make.

SHREWSBURY

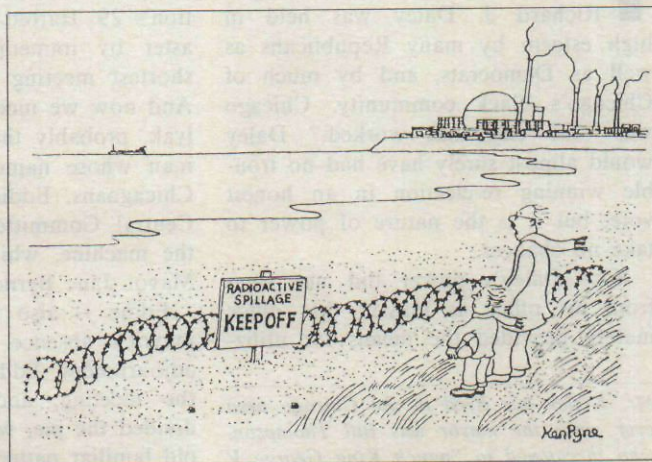
Junk Food?

British pig farmers, beset by the high price of wheat and barley inflated by Common Market regulations, have taken to feeding leftover or below-standard convenience foods like chocolate bars and cornflakes to their stock. The pigs thrive on such provender, while the farmers make sure that the vitamin and protein requirements of their charges are maintained. Canned rice pudding, cocktail biscuits, and chocolate cookies of substandard quality are also ingested contentedly by the animals, which wash their meals down with beer rejected by the pubs. The pigs are said even to relish bacon-flavored potato chips, which the farmers buy at similar bargain prices. As for the danger of pigs eating plastic cake and biscuit wrappers, the Ministry of Agriculture says they are "quite capable of separating the biscuit out of the wrapper."

LONDON

Top Pot

The second Earl of Warrington, who lived in the first part of the eighteenth century, had made for his use 11 chamber pots, each elaborately engraved with his coat of arms. One of them sold at auction here the other day for £10,450 (\$13,585)—not surprisingly, the top recorded sale price for this category.



"Of course, when I were a lad, all this were minefields."

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